CHANGING TRENDS IN LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN IN GUJARATI

—ABID SURTI*

Children's literature, in spite of all its obstracles, has proudly marched ahead with the times.

To understand its varied trends, we will have to understand the pioneer of children's literature in Gujarati, Gijubhai Badheka (1885-1935). He was a dedicated author for children who preached that to serve children is to serve the nation.

The history of Gujarati children's literature can be easily divided into two parts that is, pre-Gijubhai and the post-Gijubhai era.

Let us start at the beginning when there was no such concept as children's literature. What was good for the parents was supposed to be good for children. The fables and legends we brand today as children's favourites were actually the pastime for adults. And what the children had exclusively to themselves were old and repetitive tales told by their grand parents.

The nineteenth century witnessed the consolidation of British Raj and with it started the seepage of Western literature into India.

The educated Indians were the first to be influenced by the Western ideas. Besides the field of education, the wind of change also started affecting religious beliefs and social values.

At the same time, it also provoked parents and educationists to look at children differently, to try and create special literature that would enhance the growth of the young minds. There was a philosopher who went into a restaurant and ordered a chicken sandwich and an egg sandwich to find out which one came first—the egg or the chicken. Regarding children's books, there is fortunately no dispute whether an original story book came first or a translated one.

In 1824, the first children's book that appeared in print was *Panchopakhyan* and it contained translations mostly from English and Marathi. In 1826, Bapu Shashtri Pandya translated *Aesop's Fables*. Then appeared *Balmitra* in two parts (1831), the translation of Monsieur Burklane's "Children's Friends". Annubhai Nilkanth translated 118 tales from Chamber's Tales and compiled them in a volume. The original book contained 167 stories. The rest of them were translated by Putlibai Hormusji, a Parsee lady, and published as the second part.

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*Mr. Abid Surti *is a painter, illustrator, writer, cartoonist. Abid Surti has delighted readers for almost two decades through his famous cartoon strip character Dhabbujil. His novels, stories and cartoons, full of humour and satire, have entertained children for years and brought him fame and popularity.*

A graduate from the J.J. School of Art, Bombay, Surti began to illustrate and design children's books after being inspired by a book on cartoons. He experimented long and hard to create his own lively and humorous style.

He had done black and white line drawings for Parag Publication and illustrations in colour for stories by Gijubhai Batheka a pioneer of children's litrature it Gujarati. His comics have been serialised by Indrajal Comics *of the* Times of India. *He has also staged programmes for T.V.*

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of authors who tried their hand at writing on Indian themes. *Vikram and Vetal, Simhasan Batrisi, Sudabahoterini Vartao* etc. are a few examples. The pioneers in this field were the authors like Lallubhai Karamchand, Harjiwan Uttamrai and Jesangbhai besides a few others.

Around 1886 appeared *The Tales of Akbar and Birbal* to delight children all over Gujarat. But the one we could label as an attempt at truly original writing was titled *Murkho* (The Idiot) by Mancharam Ghelabhai (1896). It contained funny incidents from day to day Indian life. In this same period, the first Gujarati magazine for children *Baloday* was published by a Parsee gentleman called Manekji Homji. It had twelve pages reflecting the Victorian outlook on life.

It is said that 98% of American homes have TV sets—which means the people in the other 2% households have to generate their own sex and violence.

This problem did not arise in Gujarat because of its strong value system. But other problems did. When they inherited Victorian concepts from the rulers, the perspective began to change. Almost all imported books for children were heavy with preaching. Teaching young ones manners, etiquette, respect for elders and fear of God to the extent of brainwashing and suffocation. Nevertheless, with Queen Victoria taking India under her umbrella, the process of a new education system started. The very first Jesuit school was opened at my native place Surat.

Now the education department at Bombay became the sole attraction for authors, and the wind of change that was gradually finding its course started drifting from its path. The reason for this tragedy was that there were the numerous authors for children ready with manuscripts but without any sources for publication or mass circulation. If the education department approved a book, not only did it appear in print, it also received a fair royalty. The hitch was that the British were more eager to promote English literature rather than to encourage creative and original Gujarati writers. Even those authors who were experimenting with new concepts fell into the trap of the factory that was churning out translations of children's books at Bombay.

Another tragedy that struck the writers was that, the education department was controlled by Marathi scholars under a British head. Whatever book he chose for translation was passed over to the Marathi writer. After its translation the Marathi edition was offered to the Gujarati author.

As mentioned earlier, the *Balmitra* that appeared in Gujarati was originally a French book. From French it was translated into English. Then into Marathi and from Marathi once again it was translated into Gujarati. Which reminds me about the three slightly deaf British men in a car. As they were passing the Wembley stadium one of them said—"This is Wembley." The second one corrected him, "No, no, this is Thursday." The third guy butted in, "I am thirsty too. . .let's go and have a drink!" Naturally by the time the original story came to Gujarati, it lost all its charm.

What was considered to be a new education system, soon became questionable with the advent of Frobel's Kinder Garten method. The wind of change that had drifted from its path once again returned to its original track. The reason was simple. The change in education system meant change in children's books. Slowly, but firmly, the trend moved from moralistic stories to unadulterated fantasy. From dead, dull poems to action rhymes. Now nursery rhymes were no longer just sung listlessly by children, but were also acted out. Though

grandmother's rhymes too had the potential of being acted out, demands for new rhymes also grew.

One such original poem "Train" was written by Tribhuvan Vyas in 1915. It is said that this poem became so popular that children recited it even in the streets with the huffing and puffing sounds of the engine along with the whistling. (To understand its impact one has to imagine Mr. Harindranath Chattopadhyay entertaining children on TV with his own poem of a similar title). The time was ripe for the pioneer of children's literature to appear on the scene and Gijubhai Badheka arrived with a bang. But before that, he thoroughly studied all the different systems of education, especially the Montessory method and launched an institute called "Dakshinamurti" with gusto. His mission was not only to reach children but to educate parents too.

The golden era of Gujarati children's literature had dawned. Relentlessly, Gijubhai worked day and night with his band of dedicated teachers, guiding them to understand child's psychology and inspiring them to create their own rhymes and stories. The result was unbelievable. The teachers had turned into authors too. Soon the market was flooded with books for children, that too at affordable prices. For his dream was to promote literature and create a definite niche for books in the lives of children.

Besides articles and essays, collections of children's stories in five parts and 25 books compiled from his eighty booklets of tales was the monumental legacy he left behind. The copyright for this whole lot was bought over by an enterprising publisher R.R. Sheth and Co. for just Rs. 1,000/-. It turned out to be a gold mine. These brisk sales encouraged many other businessmen to jump into the publishing field. Though their aim was to exploit the authors and milk the market, it also opened up new channels for budding writers to prove their mettle in print.

With the boom in the market the publishers also realised the need for children's magazines. Though the first magazine *Baloday* had appeared in 1877, the real ones started mushrooming with the arrival of Gijubhai. To name a few, *Baljiwan* and *Balmitra* simultaneously appeared in 1921. The *Balak* was launched in 1922. *Gandiv* in 1925 *Balwadi in* 1926 *Balodyan* in 1931. It would not be inappropriate to state that the system of education revolutionised by Gijubhai influenced even the authors so much that some of them started using it in their favour.

Hariprasad Vyas, inspired by the sight of children being taught the alphabet with the help of colourfully illustrated animals and birds, created the immortal character of a goat called "Bakor Patel." Year after year, he went on creating laugh-riots through his world of animals who were dressed like human beings. Even today, the adventures of hilarious Bakor Patel are available in 30 parts, along with the author's other works.

Someone who makes you laugh is a comedian. Someone who makes you think and then laugh is a humourist. To challenge "Bakor Patel" and his gang, Jivaram Joshi, the humourist introduced "Mian Fuski", a lovable character who conquered the hearts of young and old alike. Besides fun and humour, Joshi subtly conveys the message of communal harmony and in this context, he has a clear edge over Vyas. But then, Vyas' pen is more powerful than his rival's.

This was the period that also witnessed top-notch writers known for their adult fiction, experimenting at writing stories and rhymes for children. Umashankar Joshi, Chandrawadan Mehta, Snehrashmi and Zaverchand Meghani were a few of them. Meghani came out with *Dadajini Vato*

(Grandpa's Tales) and *Doshimani Vato,* (Grandma's Tales) two collections of gems from his treasure chest of folk literature. Snehrashmi's story *Engine Driver* and Pannalal's *Vishnun Vavetar* are two unforgetable contributions.

Ramanlal N. Shah, Jaibhikhu, Nagardas Patel, Natwar Malvi specialised in presenting legends in a charming manner. On the other hand, Vijaygupt Maurya brought children closer to nature and offered rare glimpses of wildlife through his books.

In the forties, the wind of change started to subside and quite a few reasons could be attributed to this decline. The major one being the uncertainty prevalent before Independence. The whole nation was passing through a traumatic period. Most of the children's magazines were fading out or already looking archaic against the backdrop and mood that was changing from day to day.

Soon after partition came a monthly for children called the *Ramakadun* with a totally new concept to suit the children of a free India. It had 4 pages of original colour comics and multicoloured title pages, besides other black and white illustrations and features. Like the *Target* magazine, its very first issue was lapped up by children.

Once again, there was a new wave and more than a dozen magazines for children in different sizes hit the stands. After freedom, the publishers too realised the need for experimentation in children's books. Inka, Anada and R.R. Sheth took up the challenge and tried offset printing. R.R. Sheth came out with the set of its most popular series, Gijubhai's stories in ten parts, redesigned in four colours by me. While Inka publishers concentrated on fairy tales and legends, Ananda truly experimented even with the shape and format of books turning them into toys.

Authors, publishers, educationists, critics and all those missionaries who believe in change are still forging ahead. But one still has a long way to go. Children's writers in Gujarati would certainly remember it and go ahead, creating richer literature for the young.

Only an entertaining story will stay with children.